

File #

Second Thoughts

Town Meeting Moment

By JANE BRADLEY

In the days before Town Meeting, I found myself trying unsuccessfully to relax, leaving tasks half-finished and waking up every hour through the night.

The vote to expand the library was set for Saturday, and I was getting jumpy — the way you feel in the morning when a long trip is to begin later in the afternoon.

There was still plenty of work left to do in checking and rechecking facts and figures, getting the latest statistics on per-square-foot construction cost or books-per-person borrowing.

We attended 3 more neighborhood coffees in which we explained the library project and answered citizens' questions. In all, some 20 coffees were hosted all around town through the winter. Through them, we met new people, heard plenty of tough questions and found out what was exciting to people and what was troubling.

The political process is something I know little about, except as a voter and a library trustee. But in traveling from house to house in neighborhoods all over town, I could hear the voices of voters and I could feel their desire to participate.

"Come to Town Meeting," we told them at the end of each gathering. "It is your one chance to vote and your vote is important. Your vote will make the difference."

Late in the week, the telephones across Duxbury began to ring for the library. A group of dedicated volunteers called their friends and neighbors and reminded them about Town Meeting. They answered questions about the library project and said, "Come to Town Meeting. Your vote is important."

Not everyone supported the library, of course. Even after attending a coffee, reading the literature and talking to a friend, others remained "on the fence." Still, they were urged, just go to the meeting. Hear the debate.

When Saturday finally arrived, many of us were up with the first light and ready to go. I was at the auditorium long before the color guard opened the meeting, and I was among many at that early hour.

By late morning, I felt as if my life was passing before me, because just about everyone I knew or have laid eyes on in Duxbury was streaming in. Older ladies walking with canes took seats up front. Hordes of parents brought their young children to on-site daycare so both could attend. Friends, foes and undecideds milled in the corridors, looking over last-minute handouts, quizzing proponents on the facts, the issues.

Inside, the meeting was filled and proceeding slowly. The pressure of various hockey and basketball games and practices were tugging on those who were squeezing their civic duties among their parental ones. The hours dragged on, and still the library article did not come up. Finally, a lunch break was called.

The momentum that had built up all morning now burst, as voters filed out and away. It was turning into a long day, and I wondered how many of those who had come to hear the library discussion would return. I wondered how many would come back to park far afield, re-register, stand and wait and wait.

After lunch, the meeting got off to a slow start. But it was nothing to do with the discussion— it was

delayed by the line to re-register, which was snaked all the way to the parking lot. I saw the ladies on canes back. I saw Duxbury's most famous musician and his wife— back. I saw parents of young children, teachers, town leaders and I saw dozens of now-familiar faces — the ones who had asked the tough questions when we went into their neighborhoods — back. For many, this was their first Town Meeting or the first in decades.

And as I took my place to say my piece about the library, I felt all my nervousness drain away. For when I turned to face the audience, I saw citizens lined 2 and 3 deep all along the back, filling the bleachers and standing along the walls. I felt a surge of support like a current of electricity go through the room.

The presentation went smoothly and the vote was decisive — 746 to 103. It was a magnificent moment.

And it was a magnificent moment for each of us individually and to all of us together, for it was created and crystallized by the citizens of Duxbury — the ones who brought their votes to Town Meeting on a cold March day.